A SUNSET---The Glow of Memory Shines on the Shadow of What Might Have Been---By Stephen French Whitman

I WAS able to arrive back in Paris twenty-four hours before I was expected there. I went to my own house, dressed and dined alone, without letting her know of my return; for I had a desire to surprise her pleasantly in the middle of an evening which I was sure she, also alone, would be spending in anticipation.

I could picture mentally the scene of that surprise; just how I would enter her boudoir and just how she, rising, perhaps dropping a book, surely uttering a little characteristic cry, would hasten fluttering across the room and envelop me suddenly in the delicate and unique odor of her invariable perfume. Once or twice while dining the details of this imaginative scene raised in me such a tremor of nervous impatience that I was seized with a peculiar local faintness which seemed to centre in the solar plexus. It was only after determinedly changing my thoughts that I could recover sufficient appetite to finish my dinner.

While smoking afterward at a chance thought I abandoned abruptly all further pretence of nonchalance. I set out at once to see her, which I had not at all intended to do yet. Although I had rather a long distance to go I started walking, for the idea of sitting motionless in a carriage was just then insupportable. All the nervous energy which so far I had suppressed with difficulty under the check of slow movement and correct demeanor suddenly in the dark and nearly empty street broke out. I expended it in the extravagant vigor with which I set forth. My gestures of effort while walking must certainly on that account have been grotesquely exaggerated and curious.

Finally I arrived at her house and rang the bell. The door was opened by whom I had expected; a dark, lean, thoroughly sophisticated looking fellow in plain livery. He had the heavy, pale olive cheeks, the blue chin and the close clipped black side whiskers which in combination recall the impudently handsome faces of bullfighters. His wide, mobile mouth was exactly suitable for the expression, by comedians on the vaudeville stage and servants behind their masters' backs, of a variety of impertinences.

But when he identified me he lost immediately the smug, confident air which he had brought to the door. He stood for a moment quite motionless, blocking the way and staring at me in a peculiar, almost childish, manner. Then he recovered himself and stepped back with an indistinct apology, but not before his behavior had conveyed to me a vague feeling of disappointment and irritation.

I entered the little square hall, decorated according to her own fancy with dull gold panels and Japanese dwarf trees in yellow pots. Many times when she and I had come into it late at night from some opera or theatre she had cried out with fresh delight at its softly illuminated, mellow coziness: "How good to be home!" and I, agreeing, had felt a thrill almost as though from an exquisite, complete domesticity which we could never have.

But to-night I found suddenly that for me the hall had nothing at all of that quality. I tried to convince myself that it did not now seem unnaturally cold and empty, but I could not do so. My return, after all my anticipation, was being subtly robbed of its charms. Disturbed by this thought as I let the servant take my hat and coat, I asked him mechanically if his mistress was in her boudoir.

"Unfortunately, madame is out," he replied with a little cough. He went on hurriedly to say that he believed she had gone to a play. Two ladies and a gentleman had come for her. He named the ladies glibly. "It is very unfortunate," he kept repeating, and finished by saying, "But I am sure madame did not expect you back till to-morrow night." He looked at me inquisitively.

While the fellow was talking I stood staring at him as though he were recounting to me some real calamity. I had an almost sickening sensation of disappointment. I felt that after my intense expectation the delay now necessary before I could see her would be nearly insupportable. Then the idea of her being beyond reach at my return to her and enjoying herself in the company of strangers—an occupation so different from the flattering one I had pictured to myself—woke in me an unreasonable jealousy and resentment.

It is true that this jealousy was not terrifying, as it might have been if I had felt any real apprehension. Perhaps less than true jealousy it was an aroused selfishness, an irritable intolerance of any pleasure she might receive from others instead of myself. Nevertheless, of whatever exact quality this emotion was, a distinct desire for retaliation succeeded it.

I determined that when she returned after her evening of gayety she should find me waiting for her, cool, perfectly collected, prepared to abolish by a subtle method all the happiness she might bring home with her. I would be carefully indifferent, not so much so that she would be able to ascribe my behavior to pique, but enough so just to miss being entirely myself. My unusual conduct undoubtedly would disturb her; she would wonder at once if some occurrence during my absence had turned my thought in any degree elsewhere. She would suffer, and in observing her suffering I would obtain a certain satisfaction.

I told the servant that I would wait for his mistress in her boudoir, and went upstairs to it. The boudoir was a pleasant, intimate room, of soft rose and gray colors. She had contrived, in some way that women of strong physical influence have, to make it like herself; so that in it a person familiar with her was affected as though by a vague replica of her own personality. The distinctive perfume which she always used permeated the place very faintly, effecting a disturbing impression, almost as though she had just a moment before left and the place was still redolent of her.

A door at the far end of the boudoir was open; through it I saw into the more brightly lighted room beyond, where her maid was busy. This woman came out at once to meet me.

The maid was a person of middle age, neat, neutral of appearance, nearly peasantlike in her substantial placidity. Now, as always, her face, with its prim, almost absurdly respectable frame of little, plastered curls, was a model for expressionless discretion. She stood in the door of the other room with her arms full of filmy garments recently discarded, and saluted me respectfully and in silence.

I told her that I was going to remain and sat down in a long chair with a novel. She informed me how long I would probably have to wait and went off quietly without comment about her business.

Once or twice, with an apology, she passed through the boudoir carrying certain articles: a pair of small boots whose tan cloth tops were creased from being buttoned tight; a long delicate garment of transparent rose silk, full of innumerable little soft wrinkles. At each intrusion I found myself bound, almost against my will, to withdraw my gaze from the novel which I was not reading, and to observe furtively these objects until she had in some way disposed of them.

While I was so engaged, with I do not know what expression on my face, I was startled to find the maid observing me with a peculiar look, by means of a little mirror on the wall. Her look reflected in this mirror was, even if I could not translate it, the first definite one I had ever discovered in her. Suddenly she seemed, just by possessing the ability of definite expression, to grow in importance, to become significant. Instead of an automaton, she appeared all at once to be a secret observer, possessing an intelligence hitherto carefully hidden.

I began to be curious about her estimates of the things which every day were thrust carelessly within her notice. Urged partly by embarrassment at the discovery of this servant's stealthy scrutiny of me, and partly by curiosity, I asked her, to say something, my first personal question:

"How long have you been with madame?"

"Ten years, sir," she said quietly, and without hesitation continued on her way to the other room, calmly rolling together two long, gray silk stockings which she had picked up from the floor.

I stared after her, astonished and disturbed. I had a peculiar anxiety to call her back, and yet was afraid to do so. Before I had known her mistress this maid had served her for years in exactly her present capacity. Where I knew the history of those foregoing years only by vague hearsay, by suggestion, by imagination, this discreet servant could recall them in complete detail.

A freezing jealousy of the past seized me and turned me cold. I got up and stood staring toward the other room. I felt really terrified, as though the most distressing revelations were concealed there, and something was urging me against all reason to expose them.

With all my judgment I fought a malignant desire to call the maid back. I listened acutely to every movement in the other room; rustlings, an occasional step, the clink of silver articles, finally the soft closing of a door. Silence followed, and I felt that I had been saved from something terrible. In a state of reaction I turned to the table and hunted for a cigarette. Half under a pile of books I found the cigarette case, the match case and the ash tray; and in the ash tray was a long, pale ash, neatly broken off, half the length of a cigar.

I remember taking up the ash tray, sitting down with it and staring at the cigar ash without appreciation, as though it had no especial significance. Then I felt growing very gradually a remarkable sensation of numbness, until I lost completely all feeling of contact with the chair I was in, the floor my feet rested on and the tray I held in my hand. I seemed to have no sense left except sight; and my sight was curiously affected, for the light seemed drawn out from every part of the room beyond my gaze, so that in the midst of a blur I saw nothing distinctly but this ash tray, my thumb pressed across its edge and the cigar ash on it.

Presently, while this sensation of numbness was passing, I looked around the boudoir, identifying its details, convincing myself that it had not in these few minutes become another place. I put the ash tray carefully on the table and arranged the books over it exactly as they had been before. Then I got up, moving as stealthily as though I were afraid of being heard, and began to step about the room, scrutinizing everything, suspecting everything.

"I groped for one of the cold hands and gripped it."

I do not believe that I had in that real crisis a particle of the terror, the sickening agitation which my imagination, groundlessly aroused, had in the past frequently made me suffer for nothing. My emotions of the heart, as they are called, seemed rather to be still numb. I can recall only a feeling of extreme slyness, as though I had been confronted suddenly with conditions of deadly menace to me which I was now going craftily to overpower.

I approached her writing desk, and after contemplating it for some time tried to open the lid, but it was locked. Gripping the top with both hands I jerked it suddenly; it split, the lock gave way and the cover gaped open. I drew up her little writing chair and sat down calmly before the broken desk.

I began methodically to investigate its contents. There were some photographs of a place in the country that she had expressed a wish to possess; I remembered perfectly how, speaking of it once, she had said, "Roses and silence everywhere—a little silent prison of roses with love in it." I was amazed now, as I put these photographs aside, to feel myself smiling, in some way, at those words.

I found littered about the desk countless scraps of cloth, a painted box of sweets, some seals and sachets, a letter begun by her, a bundle of letters received. I took up the letter begun. It was a love letter, typical of her; I would have thought it was to me, but it commenced with a term of endearment which we had never had in common. I whispered this name several times, weighing its quality judicially before I broke the string about the bundle of letters.

There were some fifty of them, perhaps, all in the same writing. I examined the postmarks. They had begun to come about a year before, and the last one had been received the same week of my return. I read the first one, stopping after each sentence to consider it, and the last one in the same way.

In the last one was an almost petulant reference to an expected return, undoubtedly mine. The letters both had decidedly a young quality, but they were very well written, better written than any of mine had been. In one of them was a sentimental fragment from Ovid, in the Latin. I felt myself smiling again, as I read this, and actually was able to consider with amusement how inevitably it must have been wasted.

Finally I put everything back in order and fitted the top of the desk so that its injuries would escape casual notice. I put the chair just in its place and stood for a moment looking about the room, which seemed changed almost completely—a place I hardly knew. I still could not find the slightest emotion; I began to believe that it had all been killed in that first moment of discovery.

After observing everything carefully to make sure that I had concealed all evidences of my search, I went quietly out of the boudoir and down stairs. In the hall I told the man that I had decided not to wait, but to return later. I went out into the street and began walking, without seeing where I was going.

Whenever now I attempt to analyze the thoughts with which I began that walk I conclude that I could hardly have had any; that my motions were automatic and that my mind, if it acted at all, was surely occupied in a way of which I was scarcely conscious. However, I can remember some odd little details of my conduct.

It must have been raining, though I did not then notice it; for occasionally even now, when I consider the effect of street lights, surrounded by foggy nimbuses and shining with deep reflections on wet pavements, that evening is recalled to me. I know that my appearance must have been unusual, for the faces of pedestrians, some of which I found curiously grotesque, stared at me in passing. Once a light step followed me for a long way and a voice kept repeating patiently, "If you please, sir * * * just a moment, sir. * * *"

I remember that once, without any realization of the absurdity of it, I stood for a time looking into a pastry cook's bright window, examining and contrasting with grave attention all the various sorts of edibles there. Later, my wandering brought me into a tangle of carriages before a great house brilliantly illuminated, where evidently a ball was in progress. The big doors were open, disclosing behind a clump of footmen in white stockings a white stone staircase on which was laid a crimson carpet. Without the slightest curiosity, but mechanically, in my evening dress, I joined a little shabby group in the gutter staring at the guests as they alighted from their carriages.

I began to be interested in the women who stepped out of the carriage doors. They were exquisitely prepared for the ball, with all their charms of hair and skin perfected for the evening, with the long pale cloaks which they drew after them, hiding, I could imagine, what carefully planned allurements. All appeared then, as I watched them, to have under their beauty a dangerous, menacing peculiarity; their supple elegance vividly recalled to me the sinister grace of panthers and leopards. I seemed in that moment to get a distorted, distressing conception of beautiful women in whom suddenly I could see nothing but duplicity and smooth cruelty. I turned from them, shuddering, and walked quickly away.

This impression which I had received was so intense that it cleared my brain and began to develop marvellously in it. In an instant I had come to hate all bodily beauty for its power to inflict what I was suffering. But particularly I hated her beauty.

I believe that, seeing her in the light of my discovery, now I recollected one after the other every past perfidy of hers, every small gesture of imposture, every light kiss which had concealed a smile and shamed me. I felt that it was dreadful that a person should live containing under that disguise of physical loveliness such viciousness. Suddenly I stopped in the street, horror stricken at this thought:

"Where was she actually at this very instant?"

I am convinced now that from that moment I began to grow insane. I do not mean that the structure of my brain was injured then or that in that moment any permanent cerebral malady commenced. I mean that I lost temporarily then whatever mental poise I had possessed.

My sense of moral perception, which had hitherto always protected me from any very iniquitous impulse, was now gradually distorted until it became, without my perceiving any change in it, an odiously aborted quality, such as those by which criminals sometimes excuse their atrocities. For then, while thinking of her crime against my affection, the most terrible retaliation suddenly occurred to me. I was already so changed that I made not the slightest effort to repulse it.

I had a mental picture of violent tragedy in which I was obtaining redress by what seemed to me the only effective means. In the nervous gratification which followed I had no realization at all of the enormity of this thought and no appreciation of inevitable consequences. The bare idea as soon as it was comprehended became an obsession. I felt that I must carry it into action, that only by doing so could I be content.

With this purpose I began without a moment's delay to arrange my plans and found that I could bring to my aid in this matter a quantity of cool, resourceful intelligence. I walked on deliberately, noticing the streets; I was looking for a little shop which I remembered seeing in this vicinity and which as a first step I should need to patronize. Presently I found it; it was a little gunshop, still open, and I went into it.

There were two persons in the gunshop; a girl dressed for the street was leaning across the counter kissing a young man in an artisan's apron who stood behind it. As I entered she drew away from him quickly and turned an attractive, surprised face toward me. Then, with perfect familiarity and evident exasperation, she greeted me by exclaiming:

"Well, you have made me lose an afternoon in the country!"

As though in emphatic imitation of this reception a little white bulldog with batlike ears came rushing out of a back room and barked furiously at me. The young gunsmith, who was a pleasant and weak looking fellow, directed at me a beseeching smile and apologetically rubbed his silky blond beard, which was long and cut square across the bottom. He explained that his sweetheart had wanted him to shut up the shop and go out with her, but he had felt that a customer would come if he did. They had disputed about it until he had wagered her an afternoon in the country that a customer would come in before a certain time, when he would close the shop.

"And there were only five minutes more!" the young woman interrupted sharply. She was a pretty, slim little girl with rather poor clothes, in which, by some clever trick, she seemed almost stylishly dressed. But her whole appearance was nearly spoiled by a pair of absurd earrings, which I felt sure she wore for some reason against her better judgment. I would certainly have expected to learn on inquiry that the young man in the apron had given them to her, and that she was wearing them to the cost of her appearance so as not to hurt him, because she loved him. I wondered immediately if she was loving him at some other man's expense.

The gunsmith leaned over the counter and reproved the little white dog, which squatted on its tail, and quivering under restraint look d up at me with large, moist, pink rimmed eyes. It plainly wanted to investigate me further, and I remember being surprised that it was not repelled, as dogs are commonly supposed to be, by the sinister and deadly mood contained in me.

The young man said with a smile that the afternoon in the country would hardly have to be abandoned on my account, because he always had to pay the wagers he made with his sweetheart whether he lost them or not. The girl sat down in a chair, looking as though on consideration she realized that perfectly. Her instinctive appetite for subjugation was evidently gratified on that account. She called the dog to her; it jumped up into her lap, and with eyes singularly alike they watched me.

This scene, almost domestic, seemed to me a peculiar setting for the part I was about to play.

I told the gunsmith that I wanted a heavy and reliable revolver. He brought out several, laid them on the counter and began to make cheerful comments about them. I had little difficulty in selecting what appeared to me to be the best one, although he urged repeatedly the merits of a German automatic revolver whose chambers could be discharged with great rapidity. But I was afraid that I would be confused by a weapon with whose mechanism I was not familiar and that some fiasco would result.

I selected, therefore, a heavy blue steel revolver of American make which I felt perfectly capable of using successfully. I bought also a box of cartridges, and from it the young man loaded the cylinder for me. When he had done this he looked up and said with a pleasant expression of interest:

"Perhaps you would like to try it before you go out?"

He informed me that he had constructed out of a hallway in the house behind the shop a little shooting range, where he tested the accuracy of small firearms and where persons in the neighborhood occasionally amused themselves at pistol practice.

It seemed sensible to accept this invitation which chance appeared to have offered so that there might be no opportunity for failure on my part. I followed the gunsmith back through the house to the adapted hallway, which he lighted up.

The place had been arranged as a black tunnel. At the far end of it, now vividly illuminated, were three targets. The targets on either side were flat metal disks, painted white, each with a little hole in the centre. Between them was a fanciful female figure like that of an Amazon; on her arm, as though to represent a shield, was a round target like the others. The young man explained when one hit the centre of any of these targets a gong was rung.

I raised the loaded revolver and inspected the three marks. The young man stood behind and to one side. I heard a rustle at the door and so was aware that his sweetheart had come out from the shop. At this moment it did not occur to me that I, in evening dress, apparently a serious man of some importance, was doing an extraordinary and fantastic thing which should reasonably have appeared ludicrous to any one not understanding its significance.

I fixed my eyes on the female figure in the middle. Seen through the long black tunnel it had a look extraordinarily lifelike. I would almost have said that once it moved. As I stared at it my eyes grew blurred as they had in that first moment of discovery in her boudoir; the light seemed to be drawn from every other part into that figure. The figure itself seemed to change, to grow more real, to become familiar, shameful, perfidious, hateful.

I was suddenly blinded by ferocity; in a daze I heard the detonation of the heavy revolver—one! two! three! four! five! I stood staring at a wall of smoke, through which shone faintly the light at the far end of the tunnel. I still half believed that when the smoke cleared I should see something dead there.

The gunsmith advanced with a little laugh, half apologetic, half uneasy.

"I did not hear the bell ring, did you?" he stammered. "But it is sometimes very difficult when you are not used to the light."

While talking he was peering down the tunnel. He said nothing more, so I glanced at him; his mouth was open, and, looking at the targets, he had turned pale. I followed his gaze. The five bullets from the heavy revolver, all striking the figure in the same region, had half torn the head from the body.

The young man stood gaping at me, and then slowly stepped back from me. Comprehension and horror were clearly stamped across his sensitive face. I do not know with what expression I told him that I must pay him for the injury to his target, but my voice was quiet.

He shook his head slowly and licked his lips; he did not for a moment cease staring at me with his grimace of horror. I bowed to him, and putting the hot revolver into my pocket, went out through the door. In the dusk there the girl drew back silently from my path, and I saw the little white dog, half crouching, slip behind her skirts.

I walked out through the shop and into the street. There I found a cab, and telling the coachman to drive to her house got into it. As I rode, whenever the fleeting light from street lamps came into the cab, I worked at reloading the revolver. I let the empty cartridge shells lie where they fell. I recall thinking: "The coachman will certainly be called at the inquest to tell how he came to find them in his carriage. They are always particular about such little things." I could even imagine him standing up in court giving his trifling testimony with a look of vanity and importance.

At last I reached her house, concealed the revolver, and got out. In the little dull gold hall the servant, with all his natural smugness regained, told me that his mistress had just returned. I handed him my wet overcoat and hat and went slowly upstairs to her boudoir.

As I put my hand against the door I realized vividly that something of tremendous importance was about to happen to me, changing me utterly.

My first sight of her was blurred, as though I were looking at her through a long black tunnel. It is curious that in such a moment it was her dress which seized my attention; a very low necked dress of a peculiar gray black that she had never affected, made in a diabolically effective style entirely new to me. I had an astonishment at the strangeness of these trifling details out of all proportion to their importance.

She seemed to me changed by them, more remotely than familiarly beautiful, hardly the woman I had expected to find. I had no time for more than this flashing impression, for immediately the mental picture of my reception, which I had constructed while eating my dinner, was exactly realized. Uttering a little, characteristic cry, she hastened fluttering across the room and enveloped me in the delicate and unique odor of her invariable perfume.

For an instant this miserable travesty affected me in a familiar manner. With her face against mine and this suggestive redolence in my nostrils I could almost have believed that everything was as it had always been. This impression was for a moment so strong that I felt myself growing confused in a well known way.

But immediately, as though to restore me, the odor of her perfume was vaguely tainted by the acrid odor of the uncleaned revolver in my pocket. Looking past her I recognized on the table the books as I had piled them over the ash tray; in the desk top was the crack that I had made in breaking it open. Then I came to my senses and realized that everything had happened.

In that moment the closeness of her embrace, the pretence in her wide, soft eyes magnified by their nearness to mine, all her pleading physical influence, made me believe that I was contemplating now the acme of treachery. I was maddened by this belief and pushed her from me roughly. I glanced quickly around the room. I was between her and both doors; she had no possible avenue of escape.

She had retreated to a chair four or five steps from me, speechless, with an expression of profound astonishment, but not at all of alarm. Terror was what I wanted to see on her face. Watching her intently I drew the revolver from my pocket.

I did not intend to complete the tragedy at once. I wanted her first to understand what I had found out, that I realized all her duplicity, that she would never deceive me again. In fact, before finishing I wanted to wipe out by terror all the disgrace of my past blindness. Actually I desired to vindicate myself before her and then to kill her.

When she saw the revolver at once she sat down limply in the chair, and appeared physically sick. Her rouge, which I had never noticed before, stood out vividly on her pale cheeks, giving her an unnatural appearance. All her physical attractions, depending for complete success, inevitably, on calmness and assurance and insolent self-reliance on the power of her body, deserted her before my eyes. I had a savage satisfaction at this disfigurement, as though finally she were completely disclosed.

As I have said I wanted the pleasure of denouncing her; still I was resolved that if, taking advantage of my delay, she began to struggle or scream I would end it instantly. But instead of doing either she startled me by asking in a faint voice which I did not recognize:

"What are you thinking of? I don't understand what you are threatening to do?"

I answered in a tone contrasting strangely to hers, even to me astonishingly hoarse and brutal:

"I know perfectly what I am going to do, and you know the reason for this."

This did not sound at all as I had expected it to. It entirely lacked being significant enough; I felt nearly humiliated at its inadequacy. I had so many searing things to say and now that they came rushing to my lips in disorder I did not know how to utter them intelligently. I heard myself repeating violently:

"You know the reason for this!"

I had a flash of anger at myself for my tongue's impotence at such a moment. I felt that in spite of myself I was on the point of bursting out in wild, absurd incoherencies. It would be better to finish immediately, in what calmness I could secure, than in a fit of raving. I levelled the revolver at her throat, still without realizing the enormity of that gesture. The light seemed drawn out from all parts of the room to her; the illusion of the long black tunnel was again complete.

Around her soft white neck ran two infinitely delicate creases, like the threads of a necklace.

Just then these marks about her throat and something in her face, which was curiously changed and purified by the fear of death, brought before me a heart sickening vision. It was of a spring sunset in the country just after a moment's shower, when she and I had sat on the round top of a hill, as though with all the world reddening below us, and I had kissed her throat across its little, necklacelike creases.

The wet, glittering country had been newly washed, smelling of fresh earth and early growing things, it had seemed an immaculate place. The air had been deliciously clean and sweet. The soft toned sunset, of a beauty so perfect as to arouse melancholy, had drawn out of some forgotten part of my heart a wistful anxiety for peace and cleanliness. For a little while on that hilltop I had felt a strange illusion of purity in myself.

I can remember how tears came to my eyes as I looked at her then, how my love for her was in those influences so changed from what it had ever been that even all our past seemed washed away. When I kissed the little creases of her neck, blushing in the red light of the sunset, I felt as though she were a young girl and I were her first lover and this was her first kiss.

And it was this woman before me who had once made such a feeling possible!

At that remembrance I experienced the greatest grief and shame of my life. For the memory of that summer evening was so different from everything else in my relations with her that all the rest of our life together seemed a dreadful thing. In all the years we had spent together we seemed to have missed everything immaculate except that one evening, when all nature had joined its influences to strike into our hearts a realization of what we might have made out of our lives. I believed I understood now, from that brief moment when the sunset had purified us both, what this woman might have been if a terrible crime had not been committed against her. And I, who had been one of those to commit this crime against her and afterward to teach her criminality, was about to kill her because she had learned finally all the cynical details of her lesson.

A rending pity seized me, for her and for myself, for what we might have had and had lost, perhaps irrevocably. I found myself on my knees beside her, with my head buried in her lap. My eyelids, pressed tight against her, were scalded with tears. I groped for one of her cold hands and gripped it. I remember uttering in a tearing and choked voice a cry, half incoherent, half unintelligible, but expressing the anguish of my soul:

"Oh, God! Let's find the sky again! Let's find the sky!"